

Sierra Business Council - Stewardship Contracting Workshops

2. Project Summary

The project proposed by the Sierra Business Council (SBC) includes the coordination of two two-day workshops and two one-day workshops in subregions covering the Sierra Nevada. To conduct these workshops, the Sierra Business Council will work in partnership with the Watershed Research and Training Center based in Hayfork, CA, the Institute for a Sustainable Environment, University of Oregon, based in Eugene, OR, the ten National Forests and Bureau of Land Management in the Sierra Nevada region of California.

In 1999, the Forest Service was first authorized to enter into 28 pilot project agreements in order to manage natural resources in cooperation with local communities. In 2003, USFS and BLM were authorized to continue the program through 2013 and were given permission to enter into stewardship contracts with community partners for up to ten years. These stewardship contracts cover a range of projects designed to contribute to watershed health, the development of sustainable rural communities, restoration and maintenance of healthy forest ecosystems, and enhancement of recreational opportunities.

To date, over 300 stewardship contracts have been approved nationwide, with El Dorado National Forest leading the way in California, currently working on over two dozen projects. Although the term of the contracts can be up to ten years, only one ten-year project is currently underway, on the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest in Arizona. Some of the benefits of this long-term partnership include reducing fire risk on 150,000 acres, reducing the costs of forest thinning by 50%, eliminating litigation around public land management debates, and the creation of over 400 jobs.

One obstacle to effective collaboration and developing long-term projects and contracts that achieve multiple social, economic, and environmental goals is the lack of agency capacity. A second challenge is a lack of trust among community partners and the federal land management agencies. Third, federal agencies have limited financial resources and consequently challenging public relations to manage. These factors drive the federal agencies to look for projects with impressive and quick results, so they establish high-acreage, low-cost, single-purpose targets, such as fuel reduction. The contracts approved in California are generally these short-term projects that serve single purposes, most of which are fuels reduction. Short-term contracts fail to implement the multiple socioeconomic and environmental benefits that are possible with long-term contracts. There is a need in the Sierra to provide education and support to develop long-term contracts.

The workshops that SBC is proposing to conduct are intended to fill that need. Agency staff, community partners, contractors, and other interested parties will focus on developing innovative and collaborative, long-term multiple benefit stewardship projects in the Sierra Nevada focusing on water quality, forest restoration, and rural sustainable development goals. The format will be structured around overcoming barriers to developing meaningful collaborations between the Forest Service and community partners in the Sierra region. Through its Forestry Program, the Sierra Business Council has spent two years building these partnerships to enable cooperation and collaboration on forest solutions and has identified stewardship contracting as a pivotal tool in applying these partnerships to on-the-ground projects.

